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Articles in Today's Clips Friday, January 4, 2008

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Tara Grant's sister to get kids

January 4, 2008

BY AMBER HUNT

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The sisters of Stephen and Tara Grant have reached a custody arrangement regarding their niece and nephew but, by judge's order, they can't disclose what it is.

But a close source, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the judge's order, said Tara Grant's sister, Alicia Standerfer, has primary custody.

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Stephen Grant's sister, Kelly Utykanski, will have visitation rights, the source said.

Stephen Grant, who was convicted Dec. 21 of second-degree murder in the strangling and dismembering of his wife, Tara, terminated his parental rights Wednesday.

Utykanski was visibly more pleased with the outcome than Standerfer, who has had temporary custody of the Grants' 5-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter since the days following Stephen Grant's arrest in March.

The two families worked with a mediator -- David Elias of the Friend of the Court -- to come to the agreement.

Macomb County Circuit Judge John Foster had urged the two sides to find middle ground in the matter during a Wednesday hearing.

"I'm happy" the children "can move on and lead productive lives," Standerfer said.

She wouldn't say whether she was happy with the outcome, but said she is relieved negotiations are over.

Asked whether the custody proceedings were more difficult than the criminal trial, Standerfer said yes, adding, "more than any of you could know."

Utykanski was more upbeat, though she called the process emotionally draining.

"There's two little kids involved," she said.

Find this article at:

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Friday, January 4, 2008

Agreement reached on custody of Grant kids

George Hunter / The Detroit News

MOUNT CLEMENS -- Alicia Standerfer sat through a two-week trial last month in which she heard details about how her brother-in-law strangled and dismembered her sister, Tara Grant -- but Standerfer said what she went through Thursday was tougher than the trial.

"This was more difficult than you will ever know," Standerfer said after nearly nine hours of mediations behind closed doors to determine whether she or convicted murderer Stephen Grant's sister, Kelly Utykanski, would get custody of the Grants' two children.

Both women have wrangled over custody of the children, ages 7 and 5, since Stephen Grant was arrested March 3 in connection with his wife's murder.

Utykanski's eyes welled with tears as she discussed how draining the custody battle was for her. "Alicia's right: Nobody knows how tough this was unless they were in there," she said.

Attorneys for Standerfer and Utykanski acknowledged Thursday that a custody agreement had been reached -- but the details were not released.

Neither attorneys nor court officials would even acknowledge whether an adoption took place Thursday because they said Circuit Court Judge John Foster ordered all parties to refrain from talking about the details of the decision.

"Nobody can comment on this until further order of the court," Utykanski's attorney, Kathy Tocco, said.

After the long day of mediations came to a close, a reporter asked Standerfer if she was happy with the judge's decision. She paused several seconds, smiled grimly, and then said, "I'm happy (the children) can finally lead productive lives. There are two little lives that are dependent upon us."

Utykanski said she was "very happy" with the decision.

"We're very pleased with the outcome," she said. Erik Standerfer, Alicia's husband, and Chris Utykanski, Kelly's husband, were also involved in the mediations Thursday, as was William Grant, who is Stephen Grant and Kelly Utykanski's father.

But none of the men commented about the case.

Stephen Grant was convicted of second-degree murder on Dec. 21. He is scheduled to be sentenced Feb. 21.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080104/METRO/801040375>

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Tara's kids will remain with her sister

Stephen's sister to get visitation in deal to thwart adoption trial

By Jameson Cook
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

The Grant children's living arrangement will remain about the same as it has been in recent months - they will continue residing with Tara Grant's sister in Ohio but with visitation allowed for Stephen Grant's sister.

The unusual deal was hammered out late Thursday afternoon following a full day of mediation between the two parties - Alicia Standerfer and Kelly Utykanski - in a conference room of circuit Judge John Foster's chambers.

Details of the deal, reached on the day the adoption trial was supposed to start, are confidential.

"I'm glad it's finally over," an emotionally worn-out Standerfer said outside the Macomb County Circuit Court courtroom in downtown Mount Clemens. "I'm happy (the children) can lead happy and productive lives."

When asked about the child-placement case's emotional toll compared to the criminal trial, she said, "(It's) more difficult than the criminal trial, more difficult than anyone of you could know. Why is that? Because there are two little lives that depend on this."

"We're very pleased with this decision, very pleased with this outcome," said a smiling Utykanski, who was seen crying shortly before. "I couldn't be happier with Judge Foster. He's an extremely fair judge."

Standerfer and her husband, Erik, gained temporary placement of the children - a 7-year-old girl and 5-year-old boy - and have been caring for them in their southern Ohio home after Stephen Grant's arrest in March. They have two children aged 4 or younger.

Utykanski and her husband, Chris, reside in Sterling Heights. Utykanski has no children and Chris has two adult children from a prior marriage.

Adoption proceedings in Michigan are confidential, although after a case is over the adopting parents can go public, according to attorneys. Foster kept the court closed to the public when the two sides reached the deal following negotiations steered by David Elias, a Friend of the Court referee. Grant's father attended the mediation.

County spokesman Phil Frame said that the court's order will be placed in the file in 21 days.

Stephen Grant on Wednesday voluntarily surrendered his parental rights without a trial, although he has 21 days to withdraw it.

Attorney Charlie Langton, who has followed the case, said the fact that Standerfer's attorney Michael Smith and others parties did not use the word "adoption" indicates that they may have reached an unusual deal that doesn't involve a formal adoption.

Visitation is not allowed in adoption law, according to legal experts. Possibly, Langton speculated, the children have been placed in the temporary custody of another party or the state, with agreed on visitation by one of the parties.

However, Karen Gullberg Cook, an Oakland County adoption attorney, said that would mean the outcome should be public.

Cook and Langton both called the case "bizarre."

"I have never seen anything like this, this is bizarre," Cook said.

Cook, who has been practicing for many years, said she has never seen judge order mediation in an adoption case.

"It's always a judgment call," she said.

Typically, cases are referred to the Michigan Children's Institute, which makes a recommendation to the court, Cook said. The losing party in the MCI's recommendation can fight the decision in circuit court, she said.

But Cook said that likely would be temporary solution.

"The goal of the MCI is to find a permanent home for the children," she said.

Stephen Grant, 37, was convicted by a jury Dec. 21 of second-degree murder for the Feb. 9 strangulation of Tara, 34, in the bedroom of their Washington Township home. He pleaded guilty to mutilation of a corpse for cutting up her body to try to conceal the crime.

He is scheduled to be sentenced Feb. 21 by circuit Judge Diane Druzinski.

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http://www.macombdaily.com/stories/010408/loc_n3001.shtml

Grant Children Will Remain With Tara's Sister

ClickOnDetroit

POSTED: 4:22 pm EST January 2, 2008

UPDATED: 6:52 pm EST January 3, 2008

A Macomb County judge has ordered convicted murderer Stephen Grant's children to live with their maternal aunt in Ohio.

Grant, who was convicted of second-degree murder for the killing and dismembering of his wife, Tara, has voluntarily given up his parental rights to his 7-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son.

Both Tara and Stephen's sisters were behind closed doors at a Macomb County court on Thursday until the families were able to come to a resolution.

"I am happy with the outcome," said Tara's sister, Alicia Standerfer.

Standerfer has been granted custody of the children and they will remain in Ohio with her and her husband.

Stephen Grant's sister, Kelly Utykanski, will have visitation rights.

"We are very pleased with the decision and the outcome. We are very happy it ended like this," said Utykanski.

The judge has asked the court and family members not to reveal details of the custody agreement in order to protect the children.

Grant will be back in court for sentencing on Feb. 21.

Kidnapped boy home; grandparents arrested

January 3, 2008

By KRISTALE IVEZAJ

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A Wyandotte couple accused of kidnapping their grandson was taken into police custody Wednesday night. Today, the boy is with his father.

Police had been searching for Nancy Ashenhurst, 50, and her husband, Kenneth Gallina, 46, since Dec. 21 when the couple disappeared after a custody hearing at which Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Arthur Lombard ordered 1-year-old Reed Owen Radford be with his biological father. The boy's father, Ronald Radford, is the ex-boyfriend of their daughter, Janice Ashenhurst.

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Wyandotte Detective Lt. Bob Heck said police were sent to Nancy Ashenhurst's deceased great-grandmother's home where the child had been living with the couple before the custody decision.

Heck said police went to 1420 Sycamore and found two other adults, a 6-year-old child, four cats and two dogs in the 1,800-square-foot home, but Reed Radford and the couple were not there. Police then called Nancy Ashenhurst's cell phone and she denied having the boy, Heck said.

The couple was found Wednesday evening after an investigation in which Wyandotte police traced a call back to Sterling Heights where they were taken into custody at a friend's home by Sterling Heights police.

Charges are pending, Wyandotte police say.

The couple had been free pending a jury trial for allegedly demanding the keys from a real estate agent after posing as the buyers of a home they did not own. The couple has a history of misdemeanor charges for entering without permission, Heck said.

Ronald Radford, 27, of Southgate said he is planning to pursue repercussions against his son's grandparents.

The boy's mother, Janice Ashenhurst, has been in jail since Dec. 20 for being in contempt of court for not appearing in the custody case.

Radford said he was not allowed to see their son a month after his birth. He said the boy's mother became verbally and physically violent and he blamed much of their messy breakup on what he said was her postpartum depression.

Reached while he was playing with his only child, Radford said, "I've got my baby back and I'm going to make sure he leads a great life and has a great time!"

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080103/NEWS02/80103034/1004>



Friday, January 4, 2008

Detroit police look for teen missing since New Year's Eve

Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- Detroit police are looking for Tiffany "Tee" Hadley, a 14-year-old last seen by her family on Dec. 31.

Tiffany said she was going to bed about 1:30 a.m. on New Year's Eve and instead may have snuck out to a party, said her mother, Wanda Hadley.

A neighbor saw Tiffany get into a black, four-door Buick with red tinting on its windows. Two young men were in the car.

Hadley said she has searched her daughter's room and found notes that lead her to believe Tiffany may have lied to the men about her age. The family lives in a home on the 14000 block of Crescent.

Tiffany is a student at the Grand River Avenue and Evergreen Road campus of the Oak Park Academy. She has never left home before, her mother said.

"We are hoping she (will see media reports of her disappearance) and will say she is doing something wrong and come home," Hadley said.

Hadley said she called a number in her telephone's caller identification and briefly chatted with a male who said he knew about Tiffany leaving home but was not going to say much more about her, Hadley said.

The person has since changed numbers, Hadley said.

"He said he wasn't going to snitch," she said.

Tiffany is 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighs 125 pounds. She has a medium complexion, brown eyes and a shoulder-length, dark-tinted ponytail.

She last was seen wearing a black T-shirt and dark Pepe-brand jeans with a red dragon stretching from the right hip down the right leg of the pants. Tiffany had a greyish-black velour jacket.

Anyone with information should call Detroit police at (313) 596-5640.

You can reach Santiago Esparza at (313) 222-2127 or sesparza@detnews.com.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080104/UPDATE/801040420>

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Teen killed in blaze at home on Detroit's east side

January 4, 2008

BY BEN SCHMITT

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Investigators said a gas stove used to heat an east side Detroit home is the cause of a blaze that killed a 13-year-old girl early this morning.

Letra Purdue was killed in the 3 a.m. fire on the 6000 block of Barrett, near I-94. Four other people escaped.

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Detroit Police Sgt. William Anderson told reporters at the scene that the home's furnace wasn't working and the family used two stoves to heat the home: One in the basement and one on the first floor.

Anderson said something caught fire on the stove in the basement and sparked the fire that tore through the bungalow-style home with aluminum siding.

Ann Marie Burbridge, 44, who lives across the street, said she awoke to screams and saw the house in flames. She and her husband, Earl, brought blankets to family members who had escaped the home.

"Everything happened so fast," she said. "The whole house went up."

Earl Burbridge said he tried to get inside the home to find Letra, but couldn't get past the heavy smoke.

"It's very sad," he said.

Ann Marie Burbridge said her 6-year-old daughter attends school with Letra's 6-year-old sister, Zytra.

"They're a very nice family," she said. "They're good people."

She said Letra had a medical condition that kept her from being able to talk. She said she may have been autistic.

"She was a sweet little girl," Burbridge said.

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/artikkel?Dato=20080104&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=80104025&Ref=AR>

Teen killed in blaze at home on Detroit's east side

January 4, 2008

FREE PRESS STAFF REPORT

A teenager is dead after a blaze tore through a home on Detroit's east side, WWJ-950 AM is reporting.

A 13-year-old girl, who was one of six people in the house on Barrett Street, died in the blaze, according to WWJ.

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The fire that destroyed the house apparently started around 3 a.m. while two gas stoves in the home were being used to provide heat, according to the report.

Come back to freep.com for more reports on this story.

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Friday, January 4, 2008

Detroit teen dies in house fire

Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- A blaze ripped through a white, wood-frame home early Friday morning on the city's east side, leaving a 13-year-old girl dead.

Five or six members of the same family were in the home on the 6000 block of Barrett when the fire broke out about 3 a.m., Detroit Senior Fire Chief Dennis Dermidoff said. All but the girl escaped, he said.

The girl's grandmother, mother and siblings lived in the home, neighbor Anne Marie Burbridge said.

"She was a beautiful little girl and a sweetheart," she said.

Fire investigators are looking at whether a stove and space heaters used for heat in the home are to blame for the blaze, Dermidoff said.

"They were trying to keep warm," he said.

But Burbridge said she never saw evidence to support that theory.

"I have been over there plenty of times and never seen a space heater," she said. "I have never seen them use anything for heat but it was always warm."

Burbridge said the girl suffered from a medical condition of some sort. Broadcast media reports indicated the girl was autistic.

Authorities did not release the names of the victim or her relatives.

You can reach Santiago Esparza at (313) 222-2127 or sesparza@detnews.com.

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Published January 4, 2008

Detroit house fire kills teenage girl

Morning update

Associated Press

DETROIT - A 13-year-old girl has died in an early morning house fire on Detroit's east side.

Fire officials tell The Detroit News that five or six members of the same family were in the home when the fire broke out around 3 a.m.

Broadcast reports say the girl had autism. It appears she died from burns in the fire.

The family was using a stove and space heaters for warmth.

Neighbors say the fire was intense and spread quickly.

Firefighters found the two-story home fully engulfed when they arrived.

All others in the home were able to escape without injury, with the exception of the girl's mother who had to be hospitalized for smoke inhalation.

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Published January 4, 2008

Family questions why Detroit man died in the cold

Morning update

Ben Schmitt
Detroit Free Press

Family members' last image of Herman Chaney: His body in the morgue, clad in a hospital gown, identification bracelet, T-shirt and boxer shorts.

No shoes, no pants, no coat.

Now, they want answers as to why the 48-year-old Detroit man was found frozen to death this week on the streets of Detroit.

"There are people involved here who didn't just drop the ball, they dropped a life," Chaney's 55-year-old sister, Betty Chaney, said Thursday. "The hospital let us down. EMS let us down, and the people who first found him laying in the snow let us down."

Chaney's relatives identified their loved one at the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office on Wednesday evening, after a TV news report about a man found frozen to death on Longwood near Woodward. Chaney, who suffered from seizures and was frequently hospitalized, hadn't been seen for a few days, his sister said.

Farmington Hills attorney Mark Bernstein, contacted by the family, said Thursday that he plans to investigate the death.

"There are some cases that speak for themselves," Bernstein said. "And when a man walks out of a hospital in a gown and boxer shorts -- no shoes, no coat, no hat -- somebody should be held accountable."

Another sister, Jessie Sims, 56, said Detroit Receiving Hospital officials told the family that Chaney was discharged at 12:30 a.m. Tuesday. But it's unclear whether he actually was at the hospital.

Detroit Receiving Hospital officials said Thursday evening that they don't have records of Chaney being a patient there on Monday. They are continuing to investigate.

Chaney's niece, Lottie Chaney, 40, said he had a hospital identification bracelet on his body and the family believes he was at Detroit Receiving.

The people who found him on Longwood said they called 911 to report the discovery at 3 a.m. and went to bed, Sims said.

The same people found him dead the next day around 9 a.m. and called 911 again. A cause of death is pending.

City of Detroit spokesman James Canning said EMS workers took a call for a man at Longwood and Woodward at 3 a.m. and couldn't find anyone. They responded to the second call at 9 a.m., this time with an address, and found Chaney, Canning said.

Alberta Chaney, 50, said she couldn't understand how her brother even got out of the hospital.

"The hospital knows his condition and they know all his numbers," she said. "Somebody needs to help us find out the truth."

She said her brother had suffered from seizures for about 18 years following a head injury. His wife died about three years ago and he lived with various relatives, she said.

"The hospital has called us before to discharge him, and they normally wheel him to the door," Alberta Chaney said. "We didn't get a call this time, and how would they wheel him to the door with no shoes, only in a gown?"

Meanwhile, frigid conditions throughout the region have sent more than a dozen people to hospitals over the past couple of days.

At Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, three people sought treatment for frostbite, five for asthma-related problems, five for snow shoveling-related problems and one for a slip and fall. One person was treated for frostbite at Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn.

Oakland County had at least one weather-related death.

An 82-year-old Oakland Township man with a history of heart trouble was found dead Tuesday on his driveway where he had been shoveling snow, according to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department.

Contact Free Press reporter Ben Schmitt at (313) 223-4296 or bcschmitt@freepress.com. Staff writers John Wisely and Zlati Meyer contributed to this report.

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Niles Daily Star

ONLINE EDITION

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Niles Salvation Army manning mobile soup kitchen here Tuesdays and Thursday

By ERIKA PICKLES / Niles Daily Star
Thursday, January 3, 2008 10:28 AM EST

NILES - The Salvation Army has gone mobile.

In an effort to help those in need, the Salvation Army of Niles began packing its Emergency Disaster Truck with food and decided it was time to hit the streets to offer area residents and their families a warm meal.

On Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 5 to 7 p.m., the truck can be seen at the corner of Fifth and Wayne streets (in the parking lot of the old Foler's Donut Shop) where a soup kitchen is set up.

"It's one way the Salvation Army can help meet the needs," said Capt. Tracey Walters of the Niles Salvation Army on Wednesday afternoon.

Walters, and her husband, Bill, are co-captains at the Niles Salvation Army.

The program started in December and will continue for the next six months.

According to Walters, the program is in a trial basis for now and an evaluation will be done after six months to find out what the need is.

"This is for anybody that needs a meal. We've found that if we take our kitchen on wheels to the streets, people can reach us easier, especially when they do not have transportation to get to us," Captain Bill Walters said.

He explained that meals include items you would see in a soup kitchen, such as soups and other side dishes.

"Church members from Michiana Christian Embassy and our members have really helped out with this program," Walters added.



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Trouble paying utility bills? Here's help

Friday, January 04, 2008

BY SARITA CHOUREY

schourey@kalamazoogazette.com

388-8575

Some are too proud and others forgetful.

A few hope that ignoring their utility bills will make them disappear.

Whatever the reason some people don't pay their power bills, state officials and others stress that customers should not wait until the last minute to let someone know they can't make the payment.

In Vicksburg, 90-year-old Phyllis Willett went without heat for four days in mid-December, due to missed bill payments. She died a few days later, after suffering hypothermia, frostbite and pneumonia, according to her family.

Neighbors and family members said Willett was not struggling for cash, but was losing her memory and did not like asking for help. She told her nephew she was paying her bills, but he discovered she was months behind on payments.

Communication critical

Maria Almaguer, director of social services for the Salvation Army in Kalamazoo, said she is aware of one case so far this winter in which a family went without heat. The family of five had been without heat for six days at Christmas. She suspects there are others.

"Sometimes we don't hear of cases," Almaguer said. "What happens is that many families and individuals wait until the last minute, because they really want to try to resolve the bills on their own, and then it's too late. ... They have pride."

Dennis Berkebile, spokeswoman for Consumers Energy, said there are ways to ensure a friend or family member keeps service, such as designating a third party to monitor bills. To safeguard his own parents, Berkebile said, he has arranged for a copy of their bills to be sent to him.

"All they (consumers) need to do is call us and let us know," said David Mayne, spokesman for American Electric Power, which provided service to Willett's home. "We are typically willing to work with them and work out arrangements for payment."

What recourse?

In Willett's case, Mayne said the company is investigating whether its employees followed shutoff notification procedures. He could not say when the investigation would be completed.

Willett's nephew, Alex Weddon, said some have suggested the family file a complaint with the state about shutting off the power to Willett's Vicksburg home, where she lived with her 63-year-old daughter, who has a mental disability. Family members wonder why the electricity was restored Dec. 18, one day after mother and daughter were removed from the house and taken to the hospital.

“If the person who went out to shut off the electricity had knocked and asked (for bill payment), Aunt Phyllis had the payment in her purse,” Weddon said. His brother, Todd Weddon, had found the cash and various billing statements in his aunt's purse after her death.

“We are convinced they were home at the time, as they rarely went out alone,” Alex Weddon said.

Public Service Commission spokeswoman Palnau said formal complaints for shutoffs are seldom filed by consumers. “You have a sense of urgency. You're not going to file a formal complaint, which could take months,” Palnau said.

Fewer complaints

Another avenue is to call the Public Service Commission's consumer center at (800) 292-9555.

The center logged 229 consumer complaints and questions from November 2006 through March 2007. For the same winter heating season in 2005-06, the call center received 402 such calls, according to the commission.

“The Public Service Commission and the utilities both are working very hard to resolve problems much more quickly,” said Judy Palnau, spokesperson for the Public Service Commission, which regulates investor-owned natural gas and electric utilities. “There has been significant improvement, and we attribute it to the utilities doing a better job of working with customers to reach some sort of agreement.”

Also helpful, she said, are the broader shutoff protections for senior citizens and low-income customers that went into effect at the start of the heating season last year.

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Walk For Warmth hopes to raise \$50,000

Grand Haven Tribune

Thu, Jan 3, 2008

HOLLAND — The 2008 Walk For Warmth will be attended by three local representatives on Feb. 16 at the Holland Civic Center, 150 W. Eighth St., beginning at 8:30 a.m.

U.S. Rep. Peter Hoekstra, R-Holland; state Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland; and state Rep. Bill Huizenga, R-Zeeland, are scheduled to speak at the event.

Walk For Warmth raises money for Ottawa County families who are threatened with having their utilities shut off. The goal this year is \$50,000.

The agency managing the Walk For Warmth program is Ottawa County's Community Action Agency, directed by Bill Raymond.

"We want to help families before their budget needs are critical enough to warrant public assistance," Raymond said. "This is as much an economic development issue as it is a humanitarian issue."

Registration will begin at 8:30 a.m., followed by speakers at 9 a.m. and a 3-mile walk around downtown Holland at 9:30 a.m.

Contributions can be made directly to the Community Action Agency, 12251 James St., suite 300, Holland, MI 49424. For more information, call (616) 393-5615. Pledge sheets and more event information can be found online at www.miottawa.org/caa.

P.S.C. PREDICTS LOWER HEAT BILLS

Michigan Report

January 2, 2008

Between higher winter temperatures and lower natural gas prices, Michigan residents should expect to pay less this winter to heat their homes and businesses, the Public Service Commission said in a report issued Wednesday.

A combination of lower-than-expected natural gas market prices and greater-than-normal amounts of gas stored in the state have pushed prices down to the state's utilities, the commission said. It noted that all seven of the utilities currently price gas below their authorized cap and six are planning further gas cost reductions for January. The average gas cost recovery factor is expected to drop to \$7.4277 per thousand cubic feet from \$7.549 in December.

"Once again, Michigan natural gas customers are benefiting tremendously from Michigan's natural underground storage capacity," said PSC Chair Orjiakor Isiogu. Utilities can purchase the gas in the summer when it is cheaper and store it for use in winter.

The commission noted October was also warmer than expected with 192 fewer heating degree days than normal. Heating degree days are days the temperature falls below 65 multiplied by the number of degrees below that mark each day.

And national estimates put the winter overall at warmer than normal.

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Article published Jan 3, 2008

Homeless families find places to call home

More than 30 families from Monroe County are getting a fresh start this year.

Once classified as homeless, they now have places to call their own.

Sarah West and her three children moved into a three-bedroom apartment Dec. 23, just in time for Christmas.

"It's just such an amazing opportunity," said Ms. West. "It's been so hectic. I'm just so glad to be here."

On Dec. 20, the first night she was there, Ms. West said she couldn't stop walking around and taking it all in.

"My favorite thing? That it's mine," she said. "It's an apartment - we're just renting - but my family has their own space now."

Ms. West said she especially appreciates that she has her own bathroom off her bedroom and a washer and dryer in the apartment.

Her son, Nathaniel, is 17 months old and her twin girls, Carly and Carmen, will be 3 this month. Ms. West and her children had been staying in transitional housing for the last three months.

Only weeks ago, they had been categorized as homeless, but a recent round of Homeless Assistance Recovery Program (HARP) vouchers is assisting 32 families.

"When they walked in our door to fill out an application, they were homeless," said Stephanie Kasprzak, executive director of the Monroe County Opportunity Program. "Some of them were living on the couch of a friend, some in cars and some in emergency shelters."

The 32 families are now into homes because the county has been attacking its homeless situation. It started when the Network on Homelessness worked out a 10-year plan to end homelessness. That got the ball rolling on surveys, studies and grants.

Ms. Kasprzak is hoping another round of funding will assist more people. There are about 60 families on the waiting list.

MCOP was awarded \$300,000 in 2006 to combat the issue. At the last count, there were 147 people classified as homeless in the county. The HARP vouchers pay a percentage of rent for the families, who are now living in various locations in the county. The only prerequisite is the landlord must accept Section 8 housing vouchers.

Once in the program, the families enter two years of intensive case management. Ms. Kasprzak said that means they will go through programs to deal with whatever issues contributed to their homelessness. The hope is to ultimately make the families self-sufficient.

One concern that local officials have is once the families move into their new apartments or homes, they will lack things like furniture and dishes.

Ms. West had some furniture in storage, but most don't. "Most of the families have nothing," Ms. Kasprzak said. "They have nothing for their kitchens, no beds or linens. All of those things are important."

Ms. Kasprzak said it is difficult to say if the county's homeless population will all find homes.

"If we can continue to get the resources in our community, we can continue to manage the homeless we have," she said. "It can get down to very minimal."

Reporter Stephanie Ariganello contributed to this story.

THE MINING Journal

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'Room at the Inn' shelters homeless

By KIM HOYUM, Journal Staff Writer

POSTED: January 4, 2008

MARQUETTE — After nearly two months, Marquette's homeless shelter, Room at the Inn, is thriving.

About 300 volunteers take turns staffing the shelter, which began rotating among area churches in November.

Seven local churches will host the shelter for a week at a time, with more churches sending volunteers to help staff it. The churches are Faith In Christ Fellowship, St. Michael, St. Louis the King, St. Peter, St. Christopher, Grace United Methodist and Lake Superior Christian Church.

Founder Helen McCormick said the shelter hosts an average of six or seven people each night. She said she hopes with time, the number will increase as awareness of the shelter spreads.

"We know there's more than six or seven homeless people in the area," McCormick said.

On a recent night, the shelter was hosted at Grace United Methodist Church in Marquette. With just four people scheduled to stay the night and a half-dozen volunteers, the atmosphere was relaxed and companionable. Volunteers from Northern Michigan University and local churches cooked dinner and ate with the guests, as those who stay at the shelter are called.

Lois Stanley, shelter coordinator for Grace United Methodist, said staffing is a cooperative effort among the churches and organizations, with smaller host churches sharing volunteers. One young woman, a Northern student and single mom, came in from Munising to work a shift at the shelter.

A guest, who asked not to be identified, wasn't really very different from many of the volunteers. She's also a young single mother, working on a degree from NMU. She lost her apartment last summer and her child's father has temporary custody. She heard about Room at the Inn through a friend who works at a local social service agency and has been staying at the shelter since it opened.

It's not a home, but it's a place to stay for now, she said. She plans to graduate in May and hopes to win back custody of her child.

She said she's learned some harsh lessons about the world, but "Life isn't what it is, it's what you make of it."

Article Photos



From left, volunteers Dory Garcia-Thompson, Kate Williamson and Samantha Walsh staff the intake table at Room at the Inn Thursday night. The shelter was being hosted at Grace United Methodist Church in Marquette on Thursday, but rotates among several area churches. (Journal photo by Kim Hoyum)

McCormick said not all of the guests have been ideal. On two occasions, volunteers called the police to remove guests who had threatened volunteers after becoming angry. Incident reports are filled out whenever there is a disagreement or complaint.

"Other than that, we have had no problems and the volunteers are extremely impressed with the fact that these people are just like us," she said.

People usually are referred to the shelter or hear about it through word-of-mouth. Others are brought to the shelter by law enforcement personnel, who previously had to take homeless people they came in contact with either to jail or to the hospital, McCormick said. But both were short-term measures — for a few hours or at the most overnight — she said.

"They've told us they're happy to have a third option," she said.

The shelter closes in April for the season, but in the meantime people can stay there for up to 90 days.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Joblessness climbsslightly in November

Friday, January 04, 2008

Gazette Staff Reports

KALAMAZOO -- The jobless rate in Southwest Michigan edged up slightly in November from the previous month, according to state figures released Thursday.

The seasonally unadjusted unemployment rate for the Kalamazoo Metropolitan Statistical Area, which includes Kalamazoo and Van Buren counties, was 5.5 percent, up from 5.3 percent in October, according to the state Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

More people were employed in November than October in the Kalamazoo area, but the labor force grew faster as more people sought seasonal work, the department said.

And across Michigan's 17 regional labor markets, 12 saw increases in joblessness in November. Michigan's seasonally adjusted jobless rate in November was 7.4 percent, highest in the nation.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

RATES BY COUNTY

Southwest Michigan jobless rate, by county, in November compared with October:

Van Buren: 6.7 percent,

up from 6.0 percent.

Allegan: 6.3 percent,

up from 5.9 percent.

St. Joseph: 5.9 percent,

unchanged.

Kalamazoo: 5.1 percent,

unchanged.

Barry: 5.0 percent, up from 4.7 percent.

Cass: 4.9 percent, unchanged.

NATIONAL RATE CLIMBS

Hiring practically stalled in December, driving the nation's unemployment rate up to a two-year high of 5 percent, the Labor Department announced today. Last month, employers added the fewest new jobs to their payrolls in more than four years, the report said.



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from the Midland Daily News

01/04/2008

Midland County jobless rate nearly flat in November

By [Cheryl Wade](#)

An increase in holiday retail jobs coupled with a decline in construction jobs are two likely factors that kept Midland County's November unemployment rate virtually the same as October's.

The county's unemployment rate was 5.3 percent for November, almost identical to October's 5.2 percent rate and up slightly from the 5 percent rate in November 2006.

The November rate is more than two percentage points lower than the state's 7.4 percent rate, the highest in the nation.

Regional unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted, but national and state unemployment rates are adjusted to remove seasonal influences such as production cycles, holidays, model changeovers in the auto industry and climate conditions.

Midland County is too small for the state to have statistics on types of jobs lost and gained. But Jason Palmer, state labor market analyst based in Saginaw, said statistics from larger counties suggest workers found jobs not only in stores but in restaurants and related industries. In Flint, for example, 600 retail jobs and 100 leisure sector jobs were created. Saginaw saw 400 retail jobs created, and Bay City saw 100.

Declines in construction were evident. Flint lost 400 jobs, and Bay City and Saginaw each lost 100.

Midland County's unemployment rate was the lowest among 22 counties ranging from Alpena to Flint, Palmer said.

"They're not booming but certainly they're staying flat and they're not getting worse," he said of Midland County's figures.

Midland County's work force of 43,075 people was up 250 compared with October but down 350 from November 2006. Overall, there were 250 more employed people in November than in October and 25 more unemployed people than in October.

Unemployment rates increased in 12 of Michigan's 17 regional labor markets in November, state officials said.

Total employment rose in 13 regions with an average gain of a little less than 1 percent. In the Tri-Cities area, 6.6 percent were jobless, up from 6.4 percent in October and from 6.1 percent in November 2006. In Gladwin County, the jobless rate was 9.5 percent, up from 8.9 percent in October and from 8.8 percent in November 2006.

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\$240,000 short, hopeful United Way beats bushes

Friday, January 04, 2008

MARY L. LAWRENCE

THE SAGINAW NEWS

The New Year began pretty much the same way 2007 ended for Cherrie Benchley, president and CEO of United Way of Saginaw County.

She was on her cell phone, driving to yet another meeting or stopping at a business office to pick up some of the last contributions to the annual United Way fundraising campaign.

With each call or stop, she hoped the donation would move the county's largest charity closer to its \$2.4 million 2007 campaign goal.

So far, supporters have reached about 90 percent of the target. They need about \$240,000 more.

"It's gonna be close," said Benchley, who's leading her third United Way fundraising campaign.

The agency county's largest charity funds 22 county health and human service agencies.

Collections in the 2006 campaign fell nearly \$400,000 short of a \$2.8 million goal. In response to a longtime sluggish mid-Michigan economy, the charity set its smallest campaign target in more than a decade this fall.

Since taking over leadership of the United Way in 2005, Benchley and her staff have struggled to infuse the organization with needed cash.

"Our corporate donation from Dow Corning increased by 5 percent, to \$52,000, so there are still pockets of hope out there. Those unexpected increases are wonderful," Benchley said.

"We're struggling, but some of our local companies haven't turned in totals, and United Way of America hasn't told us what dollar amounts to expect from some of the larger corporations. So that makes it very difficult" in determining totals.

The Salvation Army of Saginaw County was able to exceed its annual Red Kettle Bell Ringing campaign goal by about \$10,000, collecting \$245,647.

"This generosity was beyond our expectations," said Ann M. Bierman, director of Marketing and Development for the Salvation Army, a United Way agency.

"We pray the United Way is successful, too. We're one of the agencies they support, and those funds are crucial to us and to many other agencies. When the United Way doesn't reach its goal, the negative impact of possible across the board cuts really hurts smaller organizations," Bierman said.

She said those extra Red Kettle dollars will help the Salvation Army offset additional Christmas food expenses.

Traditionally, the United Way fundraising campaign begins in September, just after Labor Day, and continues through mid-November. That's changing as Benchley and her staff receive donations throughout the year. A growing number of corporations contract with third party vendors to dispense charitable contributions, and more often than not they arrive well after campaigns conclude, making it difficult for the recipient charity to determine what funds it will have to work with, Benchley explained.

It's a growing trend.

"Even some of our local businesses run fundraising campaigns in the off-season. (Michigan CardioVascular

Institute), for example, does a spring campaign. It's just a better time for them," Benchley said.

The United Way Board of Directors adopted a new two-year allocation period, so for this year organizations will receive the same amount as last year. While the annual campaign is crucial to the budgets of the various agencies, it won't have an impact on services one way or another until 2009 allocations are decided in the fall of this year.

United Way officials will reveal the final campaign total during a Celebration of Giving breakfast at 8 a.m. Tuesday at the Saginaw Intermediate School District's Transition Centers, 3860 Fashion Square in Saginaw Township.

Tickets cost \$5. To make reservations, call 755-0505. v

Mary L. Lawrence is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach her at 776-9676.

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